

Nine Silver Bullets to Increase Marketing's Relevance: Enabling Greater Competitive Differentiation and Faster Revenue Growth

By Michael Cannon

The question, “what do we need to do to make Marketing more relevant to customers?”, has been a topic of discussion in articles and books for decades. Yet the answer continues to be elusive, sapping the resources of every business.

The most recent reincarnation of this topic resides under the banner of sales and marketing alignment. And, while there are many good ideas for “what to do”, true improvement remains minimal. The problem is that we are asking the wrong question. Instead, we need to focus on the systemic, root cause issues: “Why is it so difficult to increase customer relevancy?” Understanding “why” yields a more useful answer to “what do we need to do to make Marketing more relevant to customers?”.

Before answering these questions, let's clarify some terms. The word, “customer”, includes both Marketing's internal customers such as field sales, inside sales, sales operations, and field marketing, and its external customers such as the end users, channel partners, market and financial analysts, and investors. The word, “marketing”, includes the product management, product marketing, and corporate marketing teams.

The Big, Visible Disconnect

When you peel the onion back on customer relevancy, what you find is that the disconnect is focused primarily on four categories of marketing deliverables:

1. Customer-facing collateral (company website, brochures, etc.)
2. Demand generation (advertising, events, etc.)
3. Internal-facing sales tools (competitive analysis, market opportunity overviews, etc.)
4. Sales support training (product training, competitive training, etc.)

When you peel down to another layer, what you see is that it's often not the deliverable that's the problem but rather the content in the deliverable — or more specifically, the lack of effective content: content that is focused on your product and what it will do instead of being focused on how the customer can more successfully achieve his or her business objectives using your product.

Think about it like this: content is the words you use, both written and verbal, along with the supporting visuals, to persuade people to do business with your company. Content is integrated into every marketing deliverable. The less effective the content, the less effective the marketing deliverable. It's that simple.

Proof that both the content and marketing deliverables are ineffective can be seen year after year in [numerous research reports](#) such as the one from which this excerpt was taken:

Some 58% of vendors' marketing content is not relevant to potential buyers and reduces vendors' chances of closing a sale by 45%.

Source: IT Buyer Survey, International Data Group, December 2008

Nine Silver Bullets to Fix the Disconnect and Increase Marketing's Relevance

Now let's get back to the question of “why.” Below are the top nine reasons why it's so difficult to improve Marketing's relevance to customers and some practical ways to make meaningful improvements:

1) Poor visibility into the true cost of ineffective content. SBG research indicates that the true cost of ineffective content is between 10% and 30% of a company's annual revenue. In the U.S. alone, B2B companies lose hundreds of billions of dollars annually using ineffective content, e.g., content that is not customer-value-based, differentiated, or segmented. There is no line item in the P&L for the cost of ineffective content. The cost is hidden in the company's business model in the form of higher discounting, lower win rates, and slower revenue and market share growth. It's hidden in Sales' (field, inside, field marketing, sales operations) and the channel partners' budgets as the percentage of their time spent trying to close the gap between what they need and what Marketing produces.

Solution: Gain visibility into the true cost by conducting assessments such as a Sales/Channel Time Usage Study, a Collateral and Sales Tools Gap Analysis, or targeted surveys.

2) Inaccurate map of the categories and types of messaging required for market success. When you look at the types of conversations we need to have with end-user customers, it quickly breaks down into three, as defined by the buyer's primary buying questions:

- Why should I meet with you?
- Why should I change-out my current solution for a new solution?
- Why should I buy this new solution from your company instead of from other competitors?

The problem is that most companies are using corporate, market, and product messaging to answer the prospective customer's key buying questions and it's not working. These categories of messaging are just too high-level and descriptive to be effective, as the research referenced above indicates.

Take a look at this [customer messaging map](#). As you see in the product messaging category, most of the messaging describes what the product does, what's included, how it works, and what some of its key benefits are. It's all the typical "content" in a product brochure. What it does not provide is a persuasive answer to the prospective customer's key buying questions. What's missing, as you can see from the map, is an entire category of messaging called "sales messaging". This new category is designed to provide highly persuasive answers to the prospective customer's key buying questions. It enables the sales conversation that both Marketing and Sales need to have with customers.

**Marketing needs to integrate both *descriptive* messaging
and *persuasive* messaging into its content in order to be more relevant to customers.**

Solution: Use the sample customer messaging map as a reference, and create a company customer messaging map that's aligned with Marketing and Marketing's customers, too. Then create the required messaging and integrate it into your content and marketing deliverables. The result is a structure that gets all stakeholders on the same page, prior to the development of your messaging and go-to-market tools.

3) Lack of clear differentiation among messaging, content, delivery tools, and tactics. Messaging, as defined above, is integrated into the content, via the copywriting process, which is then integrated into delivery tools. Separating messaging from content enables you to make sure the content is highly effective. Separating content from delivery tools enables you to reuse the content within multiple delivery tools. For Marketing, the delivery tools can be landing pages, collateral, whitepapers, websites, and presentations. For Sales, the delivery tools can be competitive briefings, ROI calculators, call guides, and sales support training such as product or sales opportunity training. These "delivery tools" are then presented to the customer via various tactics. For Marketing, the tactics can be campaigns, seminars, trades shows, etc. For Sales, the tactics can be sales conversations, emails, and voicemails.

Solution: Create a company customer engagement model with a common vocabulary for each of the components that Marketing creates and that Marketing's customers use.

4) Misguided priority setting. Messaging is not seen as the *only* item that has the greatest impact on the effectiveness and success of *all* the marketing deliverables. Instead, it's seen as just one of many marketing deliverables (demand generation, collateral, website, sales tools, channel training, PR, etc.) that needs to be produced to launch and support products.

Solution: Get your priorities right. Acknowledge that messaging is “the fuel” on which your marketing and sales engines run. Then reprioritize and renegotiate deliverables with stakeholders so that you have more of the resources and time needed to produce highly relevant messaging, content, and deliverables. It's far better to produce more effective messaging and fewer, more effective deliverables than the other way around, as is so often done today.

5) Erroneous business model for allocating sales and marketing resources. A large percentage of the channel readiness work needed to enable the channel (field sales, inside sales, customer service, and channel partners) to successfully sell the value of the company's products and services is not clearly defined across the marketing and channel organizations. The impact is that the resources required to complete the channel readiness work are not allocated correctly, or are underfunded. Studies indicate that 25% or more of the channel readiness work is done by the channel, one rep at a time and one deal at a time, as the high-level descriptive messaging is translated into sales messaging/conversations. From a business model perspective, wouldn't it be more effective to have Marketing do more of this work and then leverage it over your entire channel organization? The answer is an obvious yes, but tasking Marketing to do more of the channel readiness work, even if it wants to, will have limited success. Most marketing organizations are already resource-constrained and unable to fulfill many of their commitments. The business model restricts the reallocation and reprioritization of sales and marketing resources needed to increase performance.

Solution: Gain a clear understanding of how much time and effort your channel invests into re-creating messaging and collateral — and why they do it, and calculate the dollar value of the work. Then create a channel readiness model that defines the kinds of messaging and tools needed to support the sales cycle, from lead generation to retention, and agree on which stakeholder is responsible for creating each deliverable. Combine this work with the ideas above, and you will have a much better business model for correctly allocating sales and marketing resources to drive greater market success.

6) Ineffective new product development process or commercialization process. In addition to fixing the business model, the new product development process (NPDP) must be revised. The NPDP in most companies focuses on how to bring new products and capabilities to market quickly. While these capabilities are typically wanted by the target customer, they are often not highly aligned with solving meaningful customer business problems and, in particular, the ones that the customer would be willing to pay money to get. Additionally, the NPDP produces mostly high-level descriptive messaging and content, resulting in less-effective channel readiness tools.

About 50% of all new products end up failing.

Solution: For greater market success, reframe the product development process into a customer development process. You can move in this direction by [integrating sales messaging and Geoffrey Moore's Technology Adoption Life Cycle](#) into the NPDP, starting at product definition. Combine this work with #5 above and you will have a much more effective process for bringing successful new products to market.

7) Lack of skills and knowledge to create the most persuasive messaging, a.k.a. sales messaging. Addressing the systemic issues above is necessary to increase customer relevancy, but it's not enough. This is because most marketers do not have the skills for "how to" create highly persuasive messaging, but think they do. What've been missing up until recently are [objective criteria to evaluate messaging effectiveness](#) prior to testing or launch and a methodology to create highly persuasive messaging, a.k.a. sales messaging. It's a significant gap in Marketing's professional education.

Solution: Use the criteria above to assess the effectiveness of your current content and deliverables. If there is a meaningful gap, then create an internal core competency around sales messaging. The fastest and most cost-effective way to do this is by hiring a firm that has expertise in enabling organizations to successfully create, integrate, and deploy the most persuasive messaging, and the most effective collateral, demand generation campaigns, sales tools, and sales support training. If the skill set was easy to develop with internal resources, many of the problems discussed in this article would not exist.

8) Poor alignment around the definition, rating, hand-off, follow-up, and reporting of leads. There must be a Dilbert cartoon for this infamous pain point between Marketing and Sales. Marketing complains that it produces lots of leads but Sales does not follow up. Sales complains that the leads are mostly suspect, and thus useless, and/or too time-consuming to chase.

Solution: Create a sales and marketing effectiveness task force and empower it to create a solution around these items. Stop treating lead generation as a one-off campaign, and start treating it as part of the customer development business process. Then automate the business processes with a [marketing automation](#) platform, and [use sales messaging as the secret ingredient to achieve the best demand generation results](#).

9) Limited sales experience. Some believe that marketing professionals will always struggle to be relevant to customers because most have little to no sales experience. They lack fundamental knowledge of what customers need (messaging and collateral) to make a good buying decision and what Sales needs (messaging, sales support training, and sales tools) to enable the customer to make a good buying decision.

Solution: While having a policy to hire more marketing professionals with sales experience and/or to rotate marketing professionals into Sales, or visa versa, makes sense, it's often a time-consuming and expensive long-term solution. By implementing one or more of the ideas in this article, you can cost-effectively enable Marketing to understand what its internal and external customers really need to be successful and how to give it to them. You can enable Marketing to be highly relevant to customers, to create greater competitive differentiation, and to be a driving force behind faster revenue growth.

Recommended Resources to Improve Sales and Marketing Effectiveness

- Read free articles about sales messaging at SBG's [Resource Center](#).
- Evaluate the effectiveness of your messaging today with the one-hour, on-demand audio training course, [Top Ten Principles of Great Sales Messaging](#), which includes a 14-page workbook.
 - Learn a methodology for implementing great sales messaging with the 10-page eBriefing, [The Best Way to Increase Your Sales](#).

Michael Cannon is an internationally renowned sales and marketing effectiveness expert and best-selling author on topics related to sales messaging and sales/marketing enablement. For more information, visit www.silverbulletgroup.com or call 925-930-9436.